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Talking Points for ADCI:

18 May 1987

Iraqi Air Operations in the Persian Gulf
and the
Attack on the USN Frigate Stark

The level of Iraqi and Iranian attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf has remained relatively constant since the beginning of the year with a total of seven to twelve ships hit each month.

--Iran has attacked 24 ships with a notable increase in efforts in April, probably because of Kuwait's attempts to obtain superpower protection for its tankers.

--Iraq has hit 22 ships this year. Its efforts declined in April, but have increased over the last few weeks.

--The Iraqis use the Mirage F-1, usually in pairs, equipped with Exocet missiles for their attacks. Iran uses aircraft, helicopters, warships, and --most recently--small boats armed with light weapons.

The attack on the USN Stark apparently by a lone F-1 differed somewhat from the usual pattern in time, location, and tactics. The differences suggest an inexperienced pilot flying a mission not normally used.

++Night Attack: Although night operations are not unprecedented, Iraq usually attacks during the day.

++Flight Path: The F-1 attack and return flights were closer to the Saudi shore than usual. (This path, however, is similar to a mission flown by an F-1 on 14 May.) When he turned eastward, the pilot may have believed he was closer to the Iranian shore than he was and he may have mistook the Stark for a tanker bound for Iran's Kharg Island oil export facility.

++Missile Launch: The F-1 apparently launched the missile closer to the target (20 km) than the Exocet's maximum range of 70 kilometers.

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Iraq does not appear to preselect targets. Instead, pilots locate and select targets by using the F-1's radar. Many of the Iraqi aircraft return to their base without attacking a ship, probably because they cannot locate a target.

Iraq's reaction and handling of the incident reinforces our view that the attack was accidental.

--The US Embassy in Baghdad says that the Iraqis expressed deep distress this morning and are clearly shaken by the event. The Iraqis understand its seriousness.

--Baghdad is investigating the ship attack and has proposed to Amb. Newton an "expert" investigation with the US and possibly Saudi Arabia.

--Baghdad says privately that it will apologize if Iraqi responsibility is determined. Public statements may only admit responsibility. The absence of Iraqi Foreign Minister Aziz from Baghdad may be hindering and complicating the Iraqi response.

Iran has portrayed the attack as proof of its warnings that the involvement of the superpowers in the Persian Gulf poses serious dangers for them.

--Prime Minister Musavi said that the events Sunday, including the mine explosion on a Soviet ship, were "divine blessings" that proved the authenticity of Iran's views and showed that the Gulf is not secure for the superpowers. He warned that it is not in their interests to enter this "quicksand".

--Media commentary played up the possibility of a deliberate Iraqi attack as a means of raising tensions. An Iranian official said that Iran would not remain indifferent to interference by foreigners.

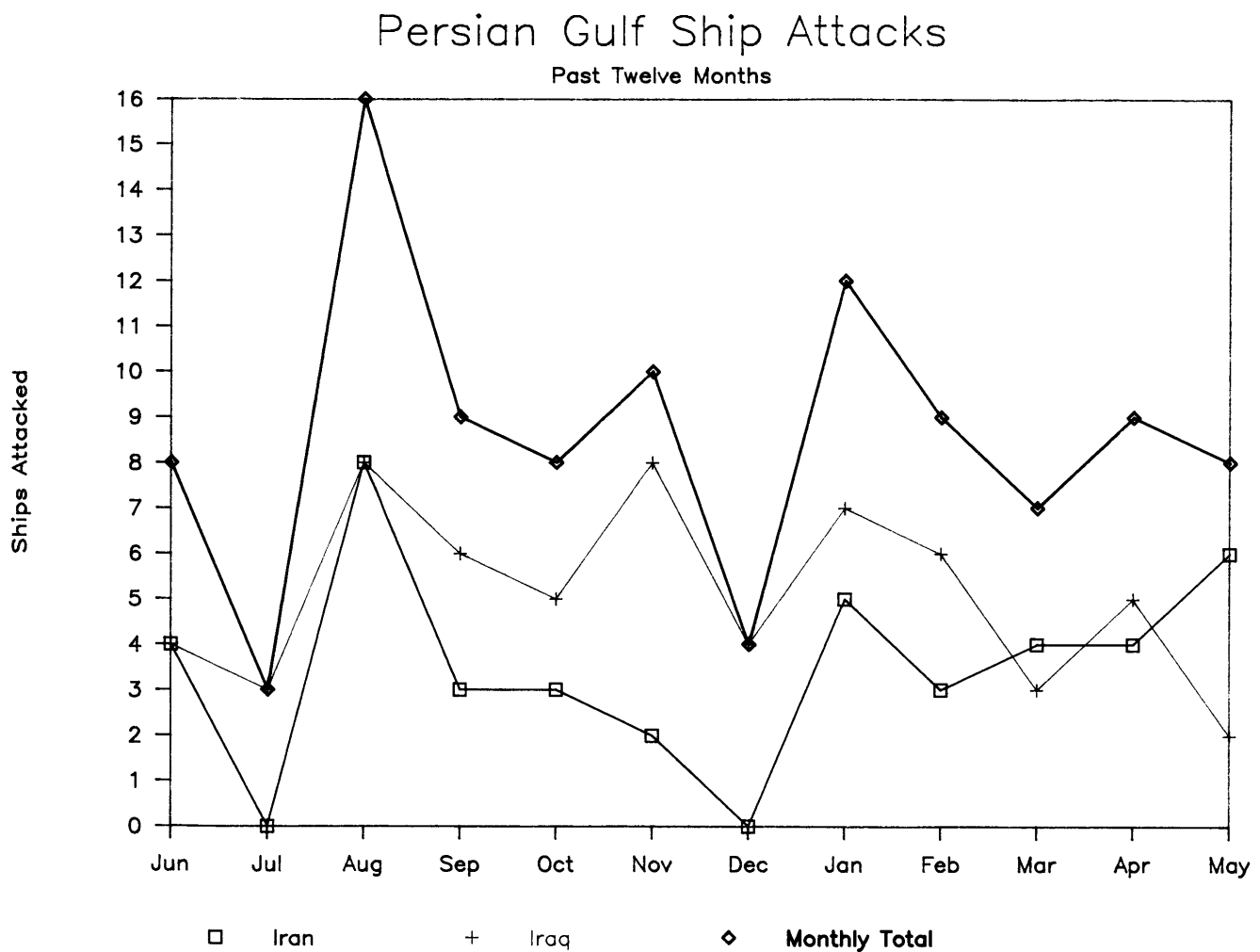
The Gulf States have made no public statements so far on the incident, but they privately have expressed their condolences.

--The Saudis and others will carefully monitor US and Iraqi reactions. Any public statements will stress that the attack was accidental and that it shows the need to end the war.

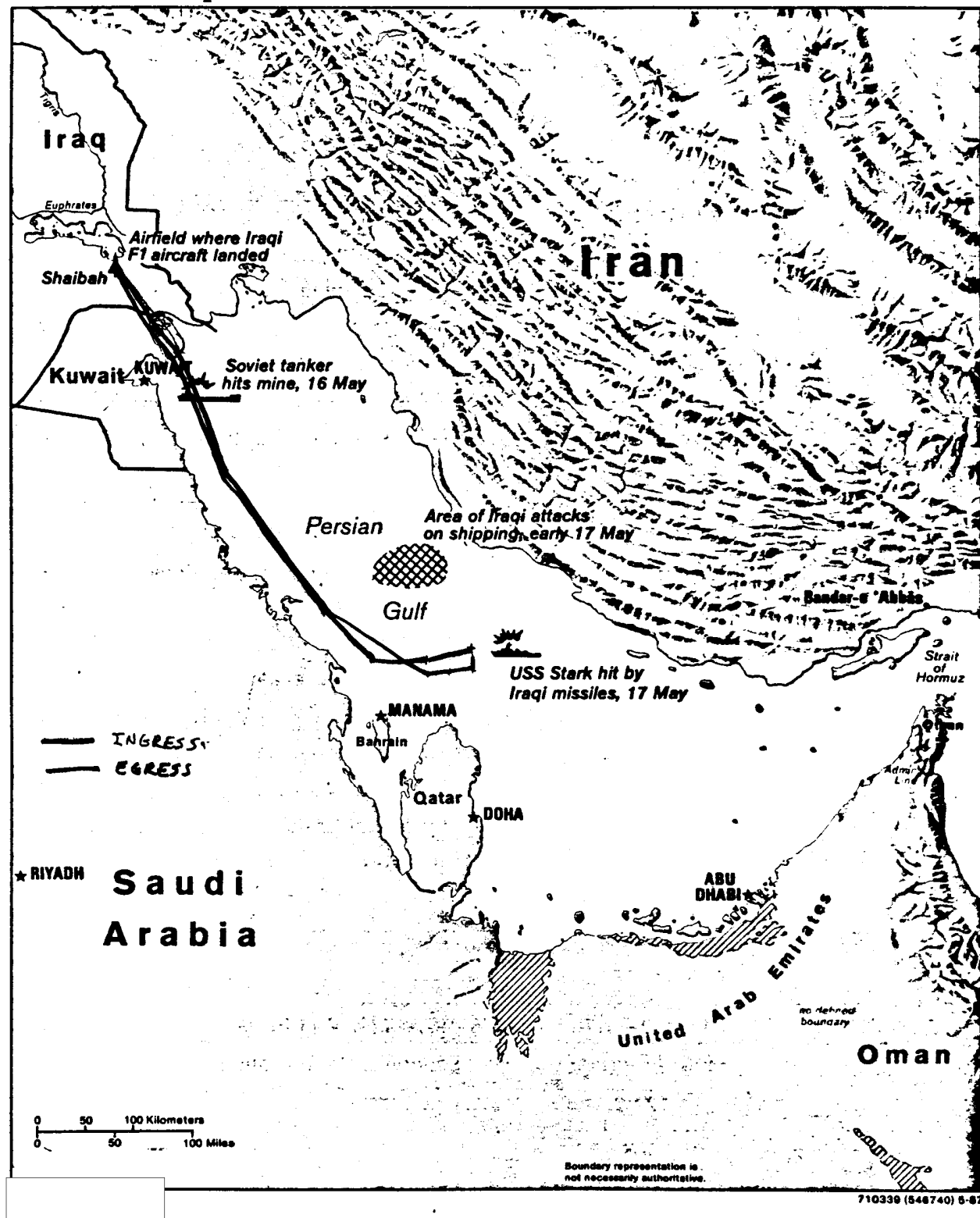
--Riyadh probably overruled a request by Saudi fighters to intercept the Iraqi F-1.

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Persian Gulf Update



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